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3.0 DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVES

POST-PARTY POLITICS?

[Ottawa – January 13, 2012] If democratic malaise is a serious and growing problem in Canada, particularly in the half of the population under our rising median age (now 42), what can and should be done about this? We see that concern with rates of voter decline is muted among those still voting and we see a cleavage on whether this is a serious issue lining up along generational lines. By way of illustration, a modest majority of all Canadians did not support the decision to leave the Kyoto accord but, opposition dramatically outstripped support among those under the median age, most of whom are not voting. In older, voting Canada, the sense is that this state of affairs is largely fine and that if you don't vote you lose your seat at the public table. In younger, non-voting Canada, however, there is massive mistrust and disagreement with key national decisions. We see that trust in democracy and government is declining to areas which cause one to think about issues of fundamental legitimacy.

Are pressures building for some sort of alternatives? Clearly, the public are very receptive to moving to some form of proportional representation¹ and our earlier research has also shown strong support for both mandatory voting and online ballots. Here we look at some other alternatives. We also note the irony that some of these alternatives may actually be perpetuating the problem of lower voting rates in younger Canada.

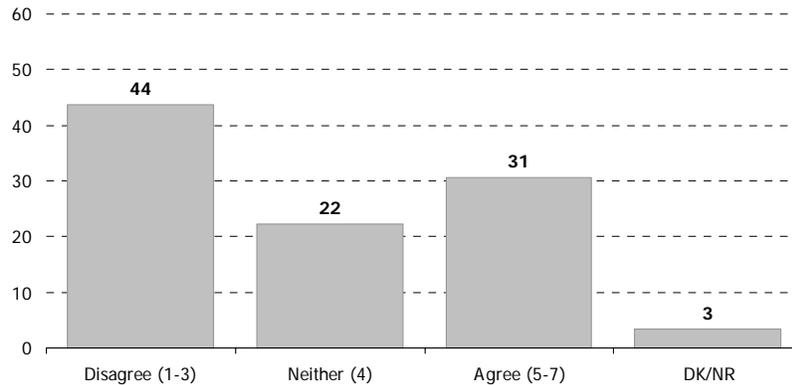
¹ See our report on electronic voting titled "To Vote... Click Here" released on December 17, 2009 and accessible at: http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/full_report_december_171.pdf



Chart 3.1 – Usefulness of political parties



Q. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Political parties have outlived their usefulness and it is time for a new type of political institution"?



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BASE: Canadians; December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)

The decline in trust in government has been led not by eroding trust in parliamentary democracy, bureaucracy, or even elected representatives. Views of political parties have declined even more steeply than trust in other portions of government. We asked whether people agreed with the rather radical proposition that political parties had outlived their usefulness. This is radical in the sense that there really aren't any obvious alternatives out there at the moment. Nonetheless, only 44 per cent disagree and nearly one third agreed with 22 per cent undecided. This is less than a stirring endorsement of the political party as the central organizing engine of politics in Canada and members of the Liberal Party may want to ponder this rather tenuous connection with voters as they convene this weekend. In fact, the support for political parties is strongest among the supporters of the Liberals and Conservatives. NDP supporters are less convinced of the continued relevance of political parties and those who endorse the newer parties such as the Green Party and Bloc Quebecois are much more likely to see political parties as anachronisms. Many of the groups which are least likely to vote, particularly young Canadians, have scant fealty to the political party system and they seem to be opting out of traditional politics in increasing numbers. In a vicious circle, this cynicism and opting out may end up just muting their voices and ultimately reinforcing their decision that there is nothing of relevance for them in the world of voting and party politics.

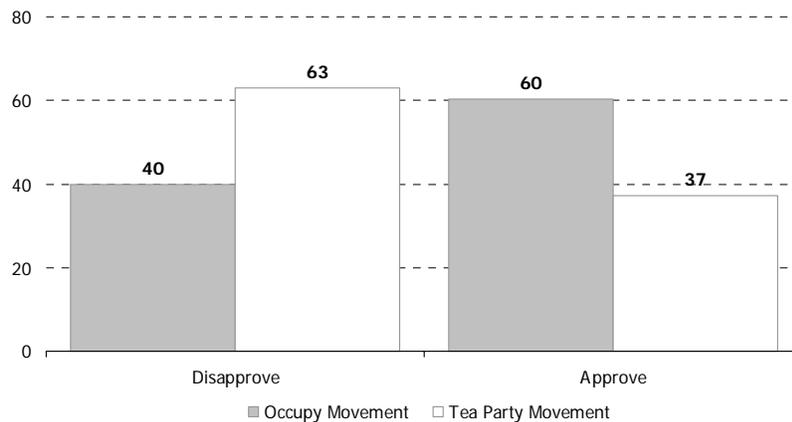
When societal frustrations build to points where the institutional status quo cannot accommodate those tensions, we occasionally see the emergence of social movements. These movements begin outside of the mainstream political world but often will have a major impact on the mainstream political world. The civil rights and antiwar movements of the sixties would be good examples. There have been more violent and class rooted social movements in Europe, but as Western societies have aged, there have been less frequent and forceful social movements in

recent decades. Over the past years we have seen a couple of significant new social movements occur (emanating from the United States). One is the Tea Party movement, which has largely remained in the United States and the other is the Occupy movement (which moved outside of the United States over the past year). While neither of these movements can fairly be compared to the earlier examples they were both powerful and both continue to exert unknown but sizable effects on the political mainstream.

Chart 3.2 – Support for political movements



- Q1. As you may know, the Occupy movement is an international protest movement which is primarily directed against economic and social inequality. Protesters will often organize marches and camp out in parks and other public spaces. Do you support or oppose this movement?
- Q2. As you may know, the Tea Party movement is an American political movement that is generally recognised as conservative and libertarian. The movement endorses reduced government spending and reduced deficits, and opposes taxation. Do you support or oppose this movement?



Note: Figures exclude those who replied DK/NR. Four per cent of respondents did not express an opinion regarding the Occupy movement, while 12 per cent did not express an opinion regarding the Tea Party movement.

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Although both the Tea Party movement and Occupy movements share a fundamental disaffection for the status quo and mainstream politics, they have quite different roots and goals (with some shared ones as well). Without pretending to look at these more complex issues, it is useful to examine how these movements are perceived in terms of basic approval and disapproval. Both movements represent unconventional expressions of the left (Democratic) and right (Republican) parties. Notably, both the Occupy and the Tea Party movements have increasingly been explicitly linked to traditional parties and the electoral politics in the United States. In Canada, this is not the case.

The older Tea Party movement enjoys the approval of about one-third of Canadians but does much better with many of the same groups it enjoys favour with in the United States (e.g., Conservatives, church goers, etc.) and it fares much better in Alberta. A majority (63 per cent) holds the movement in negative regard but this negativity is much more strenuous than the positive sentiments. Negative views are very strong in Quebec, younger Canada and the university educated; all in all not a very favourable outlook.

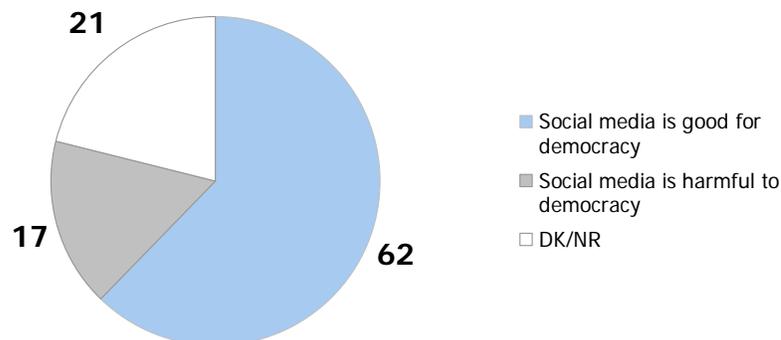
The Occupy movement is focused on inequality and it finds favourable approval overall by a majority of 60% with 40% negatively disposed. Support is a mirror image of the Tea Party support with strong sympathy in Quebec, non-Conservative supporters, and younger Canada. It is worth noting that we would find that the voting rates among those who sympathize with the Occupy movement are significantly lower than those who don't.

These results, and results from the wining national conversations, may bring into question the notion that the Occupy movement has been a failure. It has produced positive resonance with the Canadian public and seems particularly resonant with some of the groups that are most disaffected with traditional politics and their parties. It may also be the case that the allure of non-traditional democratic alternatives may be reinforcing alienation from the mainstream and hence perpetuating non-voting.

Chart 3.3 Role of social media in democracy



Q. As you know, the use of social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter has increased dramatically in recent years. Some people argue that social media is good for democracy since it offers new ways of participating in politics and communicating with the public. Other people argue that social networking is harmful to democracy, since many people will use these websites as a substitute for real world action. Which of these statements comes closest to your own point of view?



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No force has been more profound in reshaping society, economy and polity than the internet. An obscure phrase 20 years ago is now the new mass universal media. Some have argued that the interactive Web 2.0, led by Facebook, Twitter and other social media is having similarly explosive impacts as the first wave of the internet. Basic concepts of community and privacy are being reshaped in unexpected ways and politics has been no exception. Whereas social media are ubiquitous in younger Canada, they are relatively less present in over 45 Canada and this generational fault line mirrors some of the broader generational tensions we have been discussing.

The survey tested the degree to which new social media were seen as having a positive transformative effect on democracy and politics versus the alternate view that they were a distraction and having a corrosive impact on democracy. In the public's mind this is no contest. By a margin of three-to-one the public pick the positive option. We are not so sure they are right on this point.

First of all, this strong majority view strays very close to the realm of unanimity in the case of younger Canada. Anecdotally Liberal supporters are equally positive while Conservatives are less enthusiastic.

We find it mildly curious that such uncritical blanket optimism for this new form of alternative democracy, particularly in younger Canada, coexists with such dismal levels of confidence in politics and democracy. Given the increased stranglehold that older Canada is exerting over politics and the large gap in the priorities and values of older and younger Canada, it must be the case that this optimism is directed to future fruition rather than established achievements. Just as social media have been exploding this growing disconnection of younger Canada from the political sphere has been worsening. It was Neil Postman who argued in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that Huxley's future dystopia was more prescient than Orwell's 1984. At the heart of the differences was a society where trivial and idle amusement were disconnecting citizens from controlling their own future and interest. Social media may well achieve the enormous promise that citizens place in it but the record so far would suggest that the results look closer to the amusing ourselves to death concept than seizing our future.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using EKOS' unique, hybrid online/telephone research panel, *Prob/t*. Our panel offers exhaustive coverage of the Canadian population (i.e., Internet, phone, cell phone), random recruitment (in other words, participants are recruited randomly, they do not opt themselves into our panel), and equal probability sampling. All respondents to our panel are recruited by telephone using random digit dialling and are confirmed by live interviewers. Unlike opt-in online panels, *Prob/t* supports margin of error estimates. We believe this to be the only probability-based online panel in Canada.

This particular study involved an ***online only*** survey of 2,005 Canadians. While panellists are randomly recruited, the survey itself excludes the roughly 1 in 5 Canadians without internet access. The results should therefore be considered generalizeable to Canada's online population. The field dates for this survey are December 14-21, 2011. The margin of error associated with the total sample is +/-2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Please note that the margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as region, sex, age, education). All the data have been statistically weighted to ensure the samples composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.